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ABSTRACT

Although the differences in supportive resources for males and females have rarely been studied, it seems reasonable that these differences exist because socialization for males and females typically emphasizes different traits. To explore gender differences in the nature of social support, 97 male and 82 female undergraduates completed the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB) and a social network list. Results showed gender differences in network structure and in the nature of and the ability to predict received social support. Females showed a higher percentage of relatives in their social networks and reported receiving more emotional support than did males. Social network variables predicted ISSB scores for males but not for females; the network variable that predicted social support most strongly was the number of people a male felt close to and confided in or turned to for help in an emergency. The unexpected finding of gender differences in the ability to predict ISSB scores from network structure may reflect societal values regarding sex role socialization. The socialization of males emphasizes independence and deemphasizes expression of feelings. Men, therefore, must have a rather close relationship with another person before they talk about feelings or receive certain types of support, while the types of behaviors measured by the ISSB are available to females regardless of the nature of their social networks. (JAC)

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Gender Differences in Social Support

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Gender differences in the nature of social support, as measured by the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB), were explored. The results suggest that males and females do not differ in overall social support, but females reported receiving more emotional support than males did. Social network variables predicted ISSB scores for males but not for females. The network variable that predicted social support most strongly was the number of people a male felt close to and could confide in or turn to for help in an emergency. The meanings and implications of these findings will be discussed.

The purpose of this research is to explore gender differences in social support. The differences in supportive resources between males and females has not been addressed very often in research. Most of the research on social support has used only male (e.g., Croog, Lipson, & Levine, 1972; Tolsdorf, 1976) or female (e.g., Hirsch, 1980) subjects, and those studies with both males and females have typically not reported data separately by gender (e.g., Andrews, Tennant, Hewson, & Vaillant, 1978; Oritt, Behrman, & Paul, Note 1; Wilcox, 1981). Yet the socialization for males and females typically emphasizes different traits (Burda, Vaux, & Schill, Note 2). Therefore, it is reasonable to suspect that there will be differences in the type of socially supportive behaviors each receives.

What little empirical evidence there is suggests women may receive more supportive behaviors than men do. For example, Caldwell and Bloom (in press) found that immediately after a divorce, women were more active socially than men. Women also had more contact with and received more support from parents than did men. Burda et al. (Note 2) report results suggesting that females are superior to men on several different measures of support. Their females had larger social networks composed of more similar others and perceived themselves as having more support than did the males. With regard to the type of support, females reported receiving more emotional support, but there were no gender differences in the other types of social support that were measured (cognitive guidance, material aid, and socializing).

These conceptual and empirical considerations suggest that females

will report receiving more social support than males. We will also look at the ability of social network structure variables to predict social support received. Based on past research, our model states that the size of the social network and the number of people one feels especially close to will predict social support, as measured by the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsey, 1981). We will also look at two other network structure variables (the percentage of relatives in the network and the density of the network) without a priori predictions of how they relate to social support.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 97 male and 82 female undergraduate students in an introductory psychology course whose participation partially fulfilled a course requirement. Most of the students were freshman (58%) or sophomores (23%) who had never married (92%) and who lived at home with their families of origin (83%).

Instruments

Two instruments were used:

1) The Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981) asks respondents to report the frequency with which they receive 40 specific supportive actions on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (about every day). Barrera et al. report good reliability and some evidence of validity for the ISSB.

2) The social network list, a measure modeled after Hirsch (1980),

provides the following variables which reflect the structure of a subject's social network:

A) Size -- number of people listed.

B) Confide -- number of people the subject feels close to; i.e., the number he or she could confide in or turn to for help in an emergency.

C) Per cent relatives -- per cent of network members who are relatives.

D) Density -- proportion of the total possible number of relations which actually exist among members of the respondent's network, excluding the respondent.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each variable for the whole sample and for males and females separately. The two genders differed significantly on the percentage of network members who are relatives, t (177) = -2.281; $p < .05$, with females showing higher percentage of relatives. There were no gender differences on the total ISSB score.

Insert Table 1 about here

Because several researchers have categorized social support into different types (e.g., Hirsch, 1980; Mitchell, 1982; Wilcox, 1981), a principal components analysis was performed on the 40 ISSB items. Because previous research has identified four types of social support, we made the rather arbitrary decision to retain and rotate four components. The items loading on the four components we obtained are presented in Table 2.

These components are interpretable and might be described as follows:

1) Emotional support, or more precisely acceptance and intimate interaction;

2) Tangible assistance and material aid;

3) Cognitive information, feedback, and clarification;

4) Guidance with a parental or directive quality.

Insert Table 2 about here

Gender differences were found only on Component One (emotional support), t (177) = -3.378; $p < .001$, with females reporting more support.

Regression analyses were performed separately for males and females to predict the ISSB total scores from the social network variables size and confide. For females, size and confide showed no relation to ISSB scores, F (2,79) = 0.54; R^2 = .014. For males, however, the model using the variables size and confide was predictive of ISSB scores, $F(2,94) = 8.57$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .154$.

Pearson product moment correlations of the network variables and ISSB scores for the whole sample and for males and females separately are shown in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

Gender differences were found in terms of network structure and the nature of and the ability to predict received social support. Females

showed higher percentage of relatives in their social networks and females reported receiving more emotional support than males. The unexpected finding of gender differences in the ability to predict ISSB scores from network structure variables is intriguing. This finding may reflect societal values regarding sex role socialization for males and females. The socialization of males emphasizes independence and deemphasizes expression of feelings. Men, therefore, must have a rather close relationship with another person before they talk about feelings or receive certain types of support. It seems that the types of behaviors measured by the ISSB are available to females regardless of the nature of their social networks. Perhaps this finding reflects our culture's tendency to provide emotional and cognitive support to females. For males, however, support--even information, advice, and guidance--is available only from those to whom the man feels somewhat close. The implications of these findings and their relation to sex-role socialization is discussed more fully in the complete research report, of which this paper is a summary.

Reference Notes

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Table 1

Means and Standards Deviations for Whole Sample and

For Males and Females

	Whole sample (N=179)		Males (n=97)		Females (n=82)	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Size	10.87	3.80	11.15	4.13	10.54	3.36
Confide	7.41	3.46	7.62	3.83	7.16	2.97
%Relatives	38.31	19.53	35.28	19.59	41.89	18.95
Density	.29	.16	.29	.16	.28	.16
Satisfaction	15.46	3.47	15.04	3.87	15.95	2.86
ISSB	2.52	.54	2.48	.55	2.57	.54

Table 2

Promax Rotated Principal Components from the ISSB

ISSB Item		Loading
	Component 1	
31	Told you she/he feels close to you	.82
18	Comforted you by showing you some physical affection	.76
10	Told you that you are OK just the way you are	.73
29	Let you know that she/he will be around if you need assistance.	.71
30	Expressed interest and concern in your well-being	.61
24	Listened to you talk about your private feelings	.58
2	Was right there with you (physically) in a stressful situation.	.45
14	Expressed esteem or respect for a competency or personal quality of yours.	.44
	Component 2	
4	Watched after your possessions when you were away	.66
38	Provided you with a place to stay	.61
34	Loaned you over $25	.61
17	Gave you over $25	.46
39	Pitched in to help you do something that needed to get done.	.45
1	Looked after a family member when you were away	.45
3	Provided you with a place where you could get away	.42

Component 3

28	Told you how he/she felt in a situation that was similar to yours	.80
5	Told you what she/he did in a situation that was similar to yours	.79
36	Gave you feedback on how you were doing without saying it was good or bad	.57
27	Said things that made your situation clearer and easier to understand	.56
7	Talked with you about some interest of yours	.49
6	Did some activity together to help you get your mind off things	.44
33	Told you what to expect in a situation that was about to happen	.41
37	Joked and kidded to try to cheer you up	.41
16	Suggested some action that you should take	.40
15	Gave you some information on how to do something	.40

Component 4

21	Checked back to see if you followed the advice you were given	.65
13	Made it clear what was expected of you	.55
22	Gave you under $25	.53
32	Told you who you should see for assistance	.51
17	Gave you over $25	.51

12	Assisted you in setting a goal for yourself	.48
23	Helped you understand why you didn't do something well	.45
19	Gave you some information to help you understand a situation you were in	.43

Table 3

Intercorrelations of Social Network Variables and ISSB Scores

	Whole sample (N=179)	Males (n=97)	Females (n=82)
Size	.13	.16	.11
Confide	.25**	.37**	.10
%Relatives	-.10	-.19	-.01
Density	.12	.23*	-.01

*p < .05
**p < .001